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(54) ELECTROCHEMICAL FUEL CELL WITH AN ELECTRODE SUBSTRATE HAVING AN IN-PLANE
NONUNIFORM STRUCTURE FOR CONTROL OF REACTANT AND PRODUCT TRANSPORT

ELEKTROCHEMISCHE BRENNSTOFFZELLE MIT EINEM ELEKTRODENSUBSTRAT MIT IN DER
EBENE VARIIERENDER STRUKTUR ZUR KONTROLLE VON REAKTANT- UND
PRODUKTSTROEMUNG

PILE A COMBUSTIBLE A SUBSTRAT D'ELECTRODE AYANT UNE STRUCTURE NON UNIFORME
DANS LE MEME PLAN POUR LA REGULATION DES TRANSFERTS DE REACTIFS ET DE
PRODUITS

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US-A- 5 300 370	

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FIG. 1A

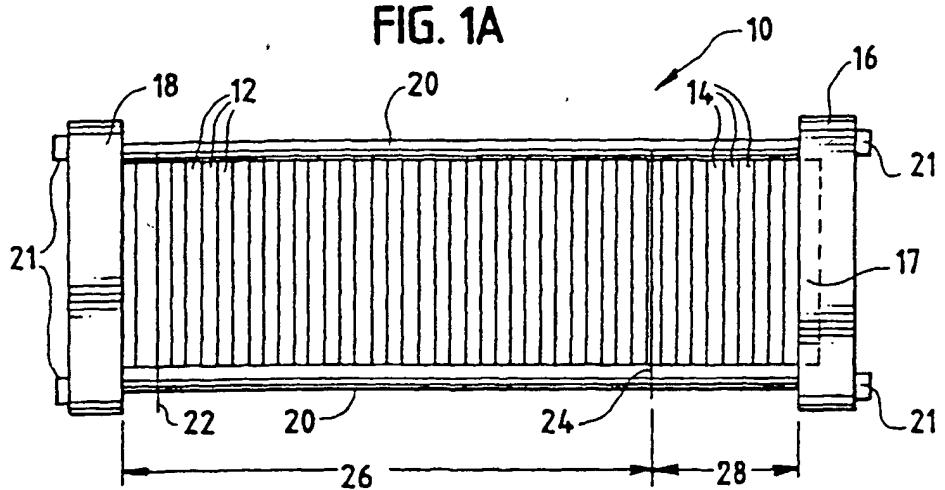


FIG. 1B

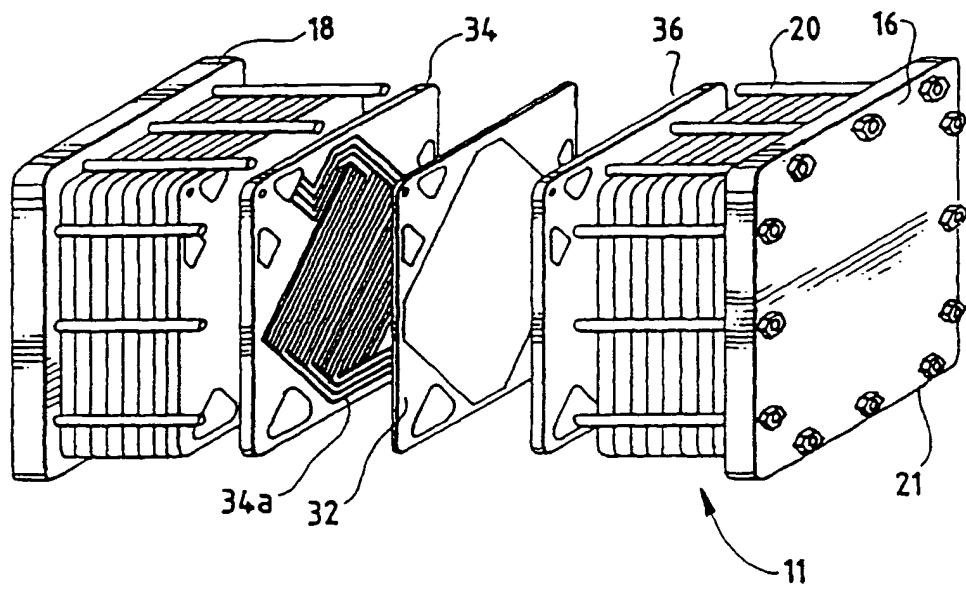


FIG. 2

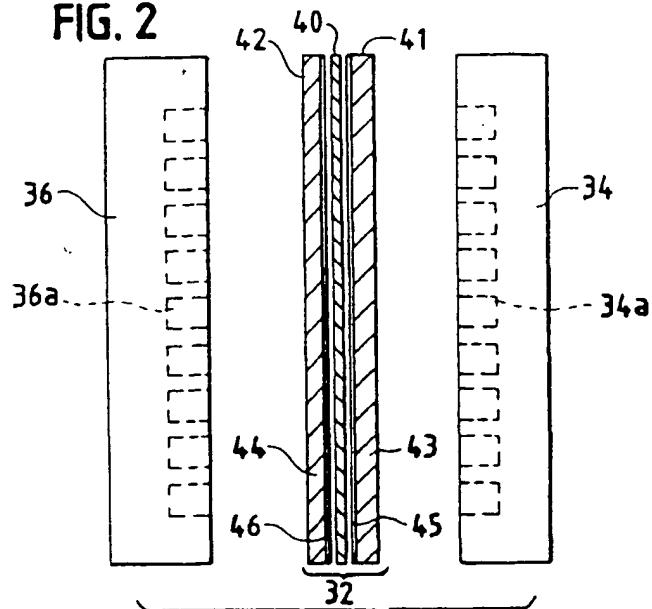


FIG. 3

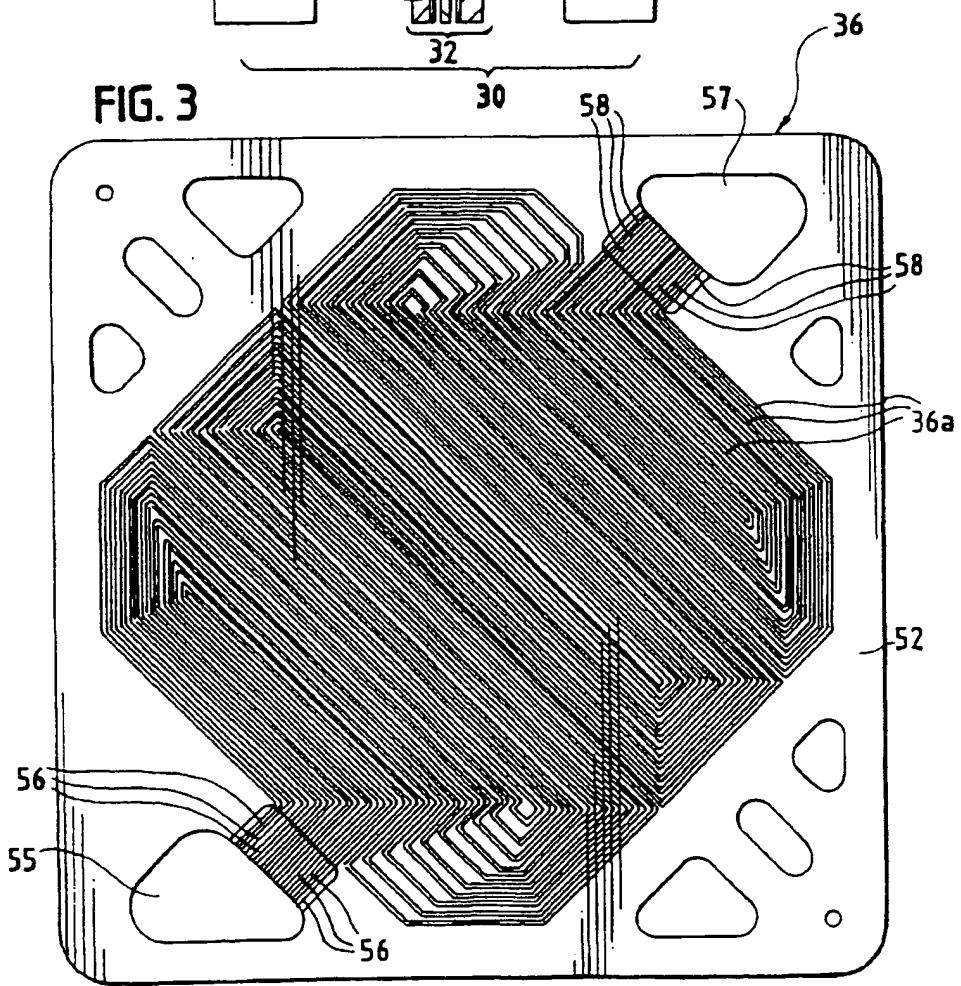


FIG. 4
PRIOR ART

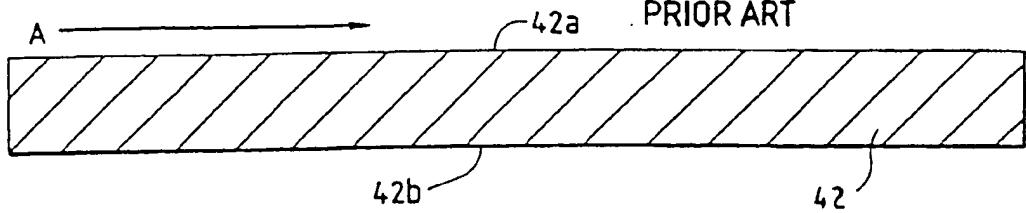


FIG. 5

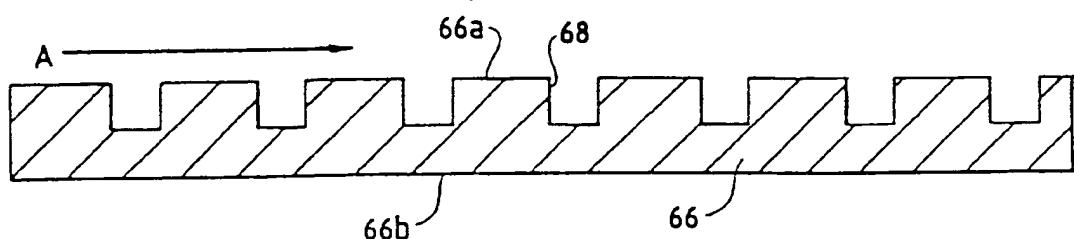


FIG. 6

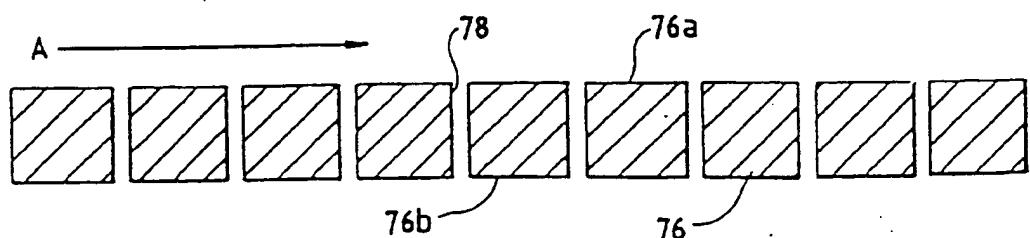


FIG. 7

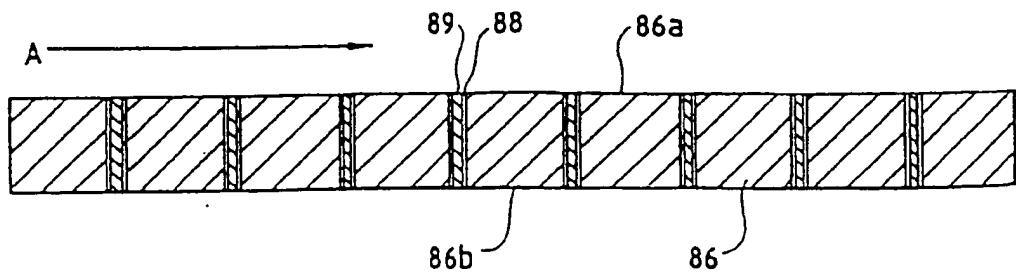


FIG. 8

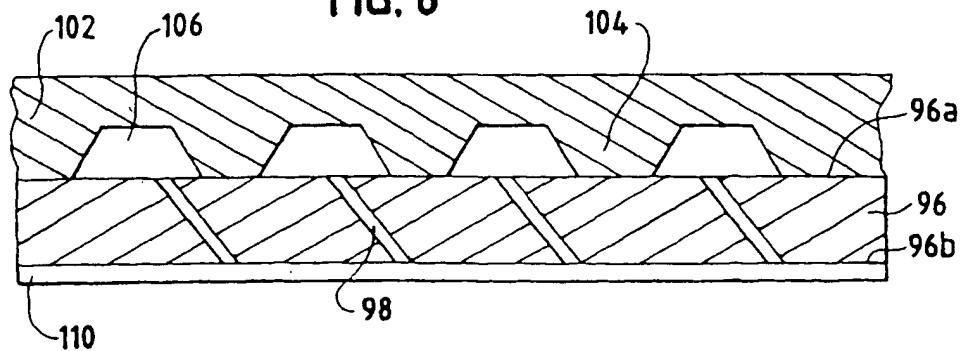


FIG. 9

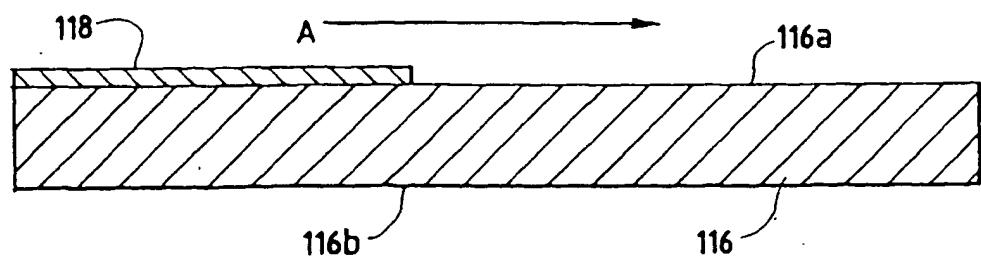


FIG. 10

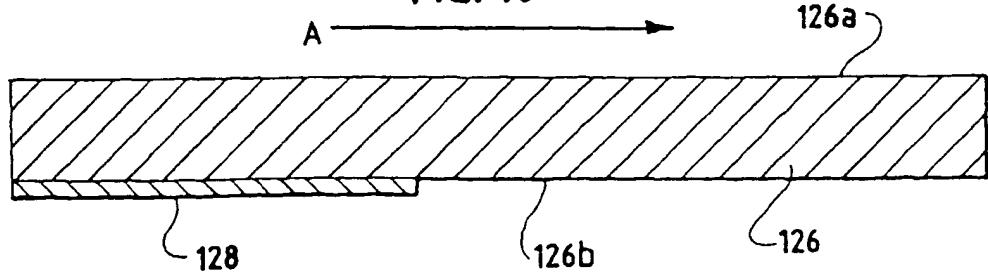


FIG. 11

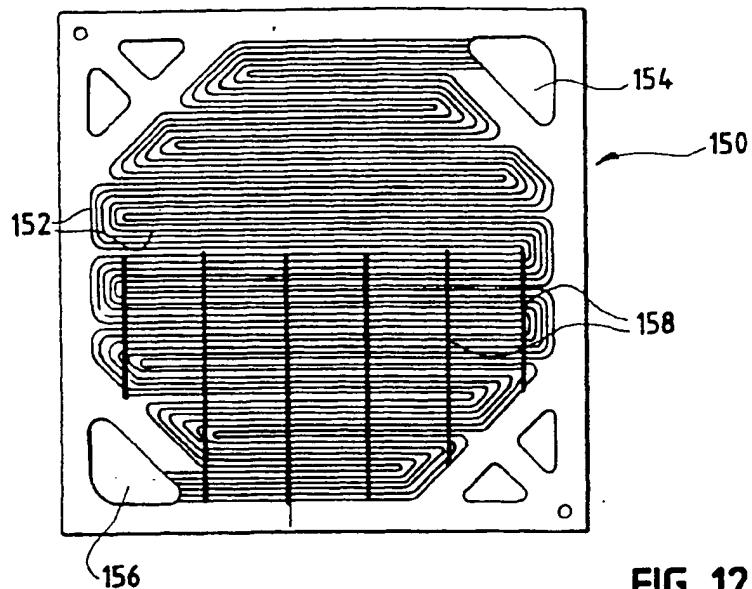
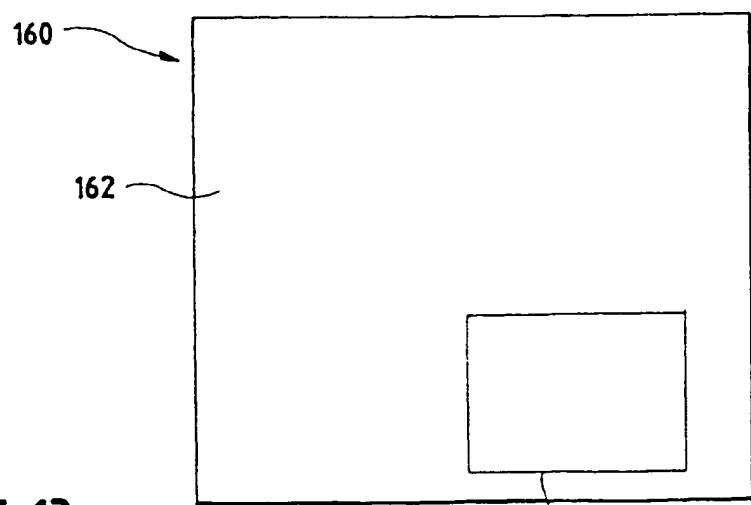


FIG. 12



176 FIG. 13

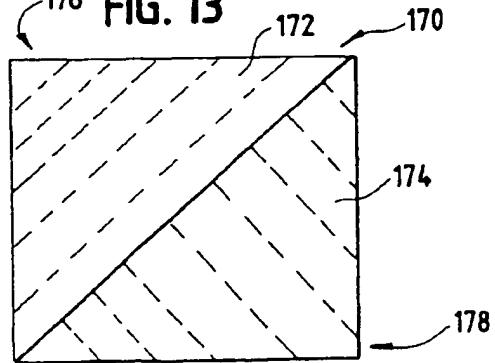


FIG. 14A

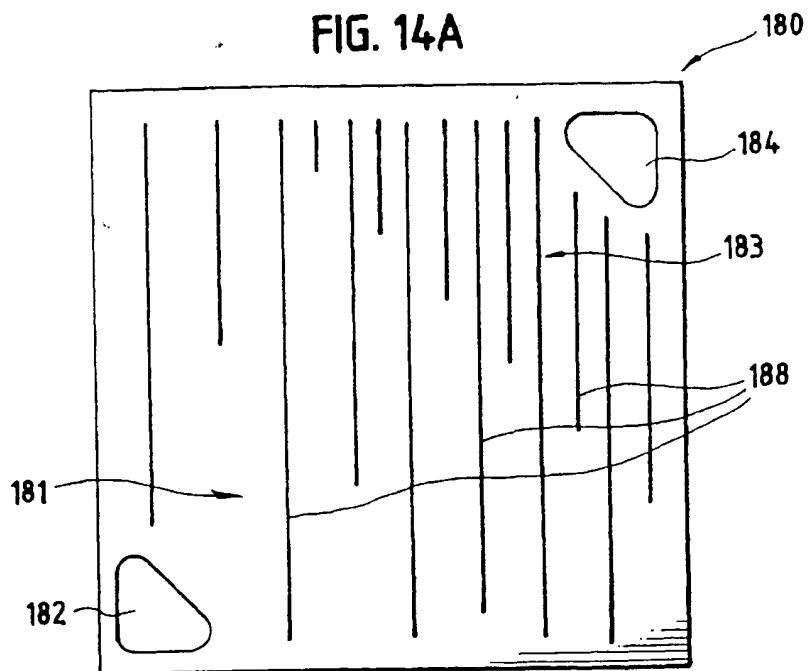


FIG. 14B

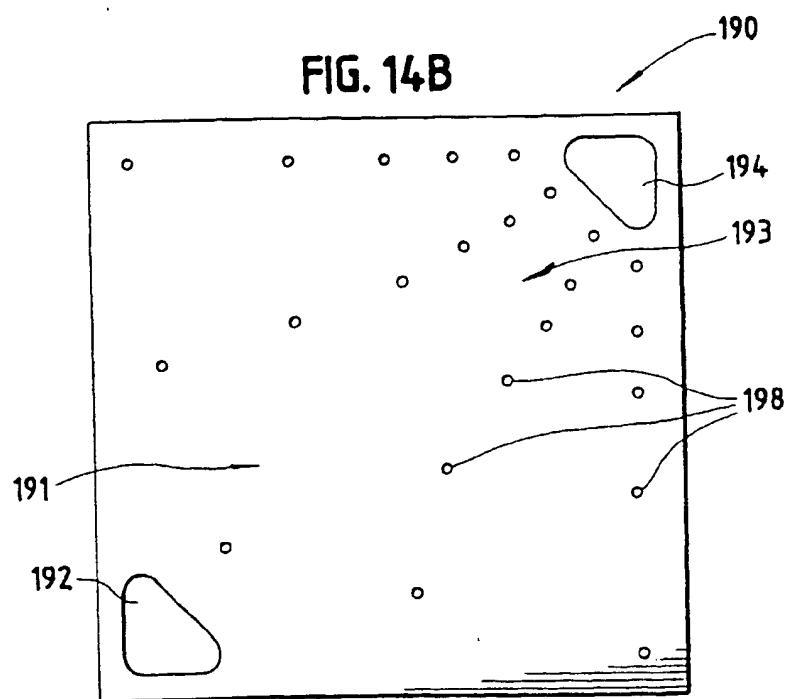


FIG. 15

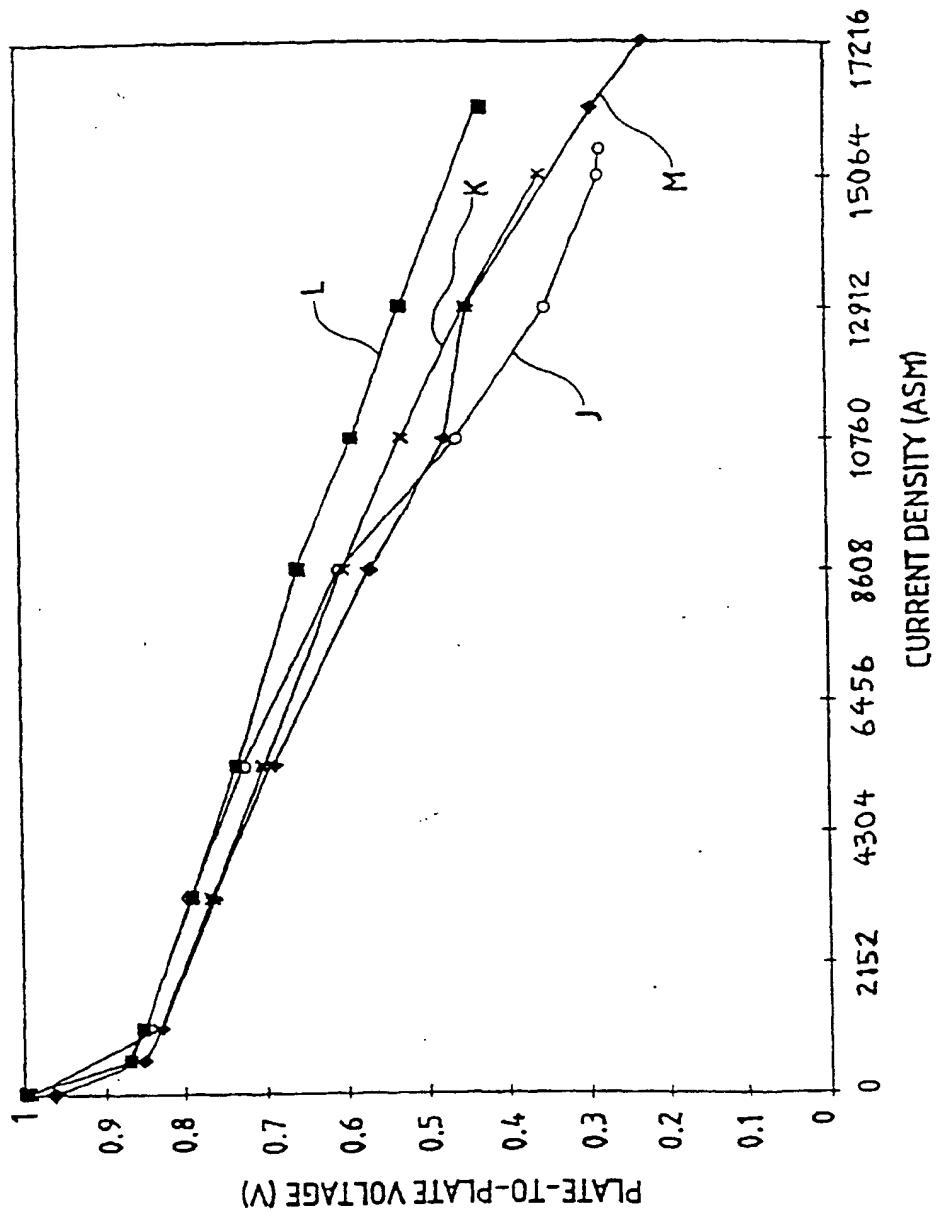
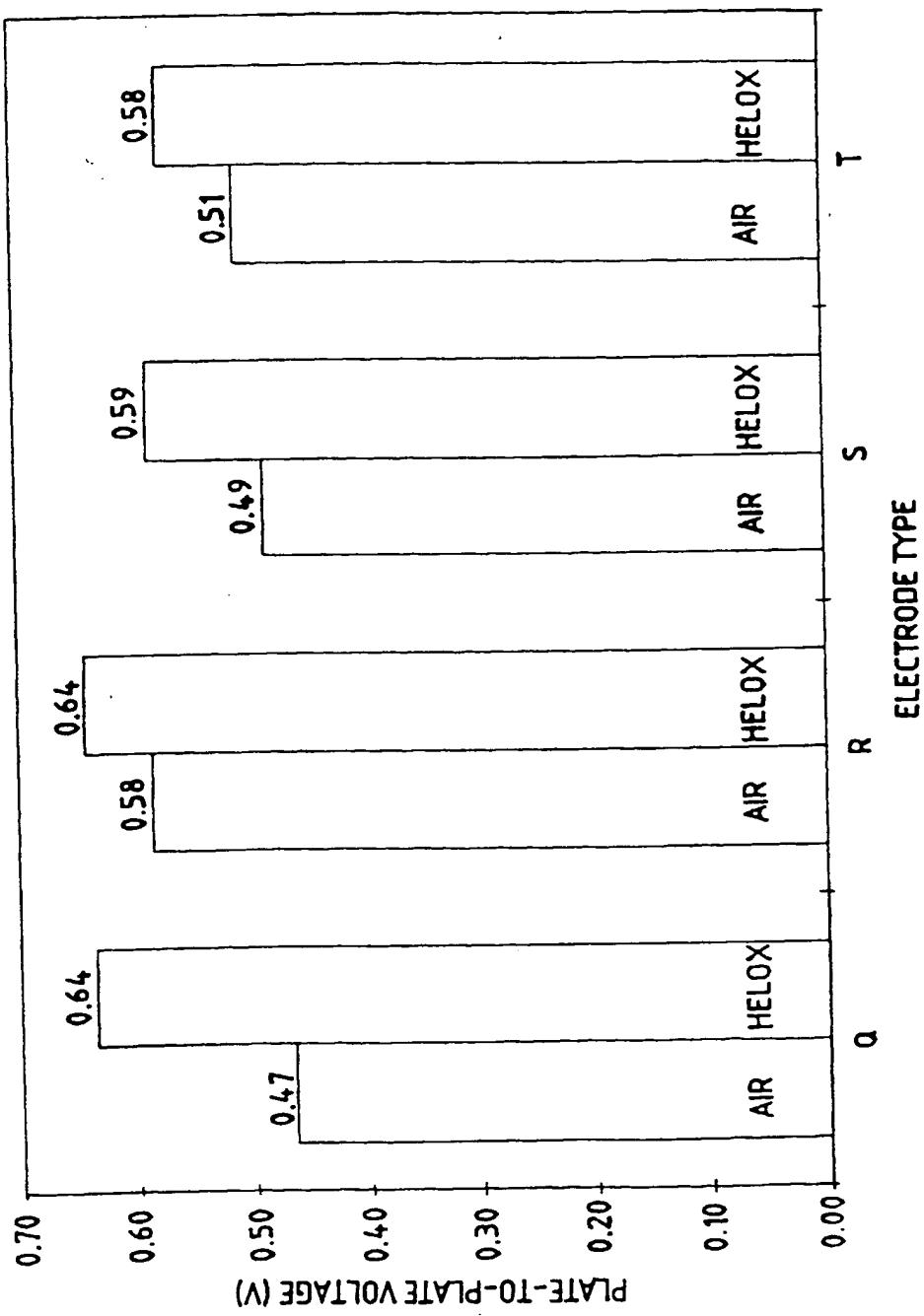


FIG. 16



Description

[0001] This invention relates generally to electrochemical fuel cells.

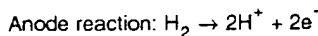
[0002] Electrochemical fuel cells convert fuel and oxidant to electricity and reaction product. Solid polymer electrochemical fuel cells generally employ a membrane electrode assembly ("MEA") comprising a solid polymer electrolyte or ion exchange membrane disposed between two planar electrode diffusion layers or substrates formed of porous, electrically conductive sheet material, such as carbon fiber paper or carbon cloth. Suitable carbon fiber paper sheet material is available, for example, from Toray Industries, Inc. with grade designations such as TGP090, TGP060 and TGP030 having thicknesses of 0.27 mm, 0.19 mm and 0.10 mm, respectively, and a porosity of approximately 70%.

[0003] Carbon fiber paper sheet material is also available in other thicknesses and porosities. Typically, the structure of the electrode substrate is substantially uniform, on a macroscopic scale, as it is traversed in-plane (that is, in the x- and y-directions, parallel to the planar major surfaces of the electrode substrate) at any depth.

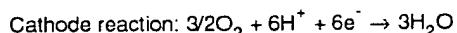
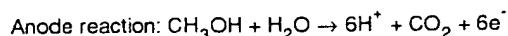
[0004] The MEA contains a layer of electrocatalyst, typically in the form of finely comminuted platinum, at each membrane/electrode substrate interface to induce the desired electrochemical reaction. The electrodes are electrically coupled to provide a path for conducting electrons between the electrodes through an external load.

[0005] At the anode, the fuel stream moves through the porous anode substrate and is oxidized at the anode electrocatalyst layer. At the cathode, the oxidant stream moves through the porous cathode substrate and is reduced at the cathode electrocatalyst layer to form a reaction product.

[0006] In electrochemical fuel cells employing hydrogen as the fuel and oxygen-containing air (or substantially pure oxygen) as the oxidant, the catalyzed reaction at the anode produces hydrogen cations (protons) from the fuel supply. The ion exchange membrane facilitates the migration of hydrogen ions from the anode to the cathode. In addition to conducting hydrogen ions, the membrane isolates the hydrogen-containing fuel stream from the oxygen-containing oxidant stream. At the cathode electrocatalyst layer, oxygen reacts with the hydrogen ions that have crossed the membrane to form water as the reaction product. The anode and cathode reactions in hydrogen/oxygen fuel cells are shown in the following equations:



[0007] In electrochemical fuel cells employing methanol as the fuel supplied to the anode (so-called "direct methanol" fuel cells) and oxygen-containing air (or substantially pure oxygen) to the cathode, the methanol is oxidized at the anode to produce hydrogen ions (protons) and carbon dioxide. Typically, the methanol is supplied to the anode as an aqueous solution. The hydrogen ions migrate through the ion exchange membrane from the anode to the cathode, and at the cathode electrocatalyst layer, oxygen reacts with the hydrogen ions to form water. The anode and cathode reactions in this type of direct methanol fuel cell are shown in the following equations:



[0008] In fuel cells employing proton exchange membranes and running at low oxygen stoichiometry, the oxidant stream enters the fuel cell at an initial humidity level, typically between 70% and 100% relative humidity. "Stoichiometry" is the ratio of the amount of reactant supplied to the fuel cell stack to the amount of reactant actually consumed in fuel cell stack (unconsumed reactants exit the fuel cell stack). A hydrogen stoichiometry of 1.35 means that 135 parts of hydrogen are supplied to the fuel cell stack for each 100 parts actually consumed in the fuel cell stack.

[0009] In electrochemical fuel cells, the MEA is typically interposed between two fluid flow field plates (anode and cathode plates). The plates act as current collectors, provide support to the MEA, provide means for access of the fuel and oxidant to the anode and cathode surfaces, respectively, and provide for the removal of product water formed during operation of the cells.

[0010] As the oxidant stream travels through the fluid flow channels typically formed in the fluid flow field plates of the cell, the stream absorbs water that is produced as the product of the electrochemical reaction. The product water is absorbed either as water vapor or as entrained water droplets. As a result, the portion of the flow field into which the oxidant stream is introduced and through which the oxidant stream initially flows is drier than the portion of the flow

field through which the oxidant stream flows just prior to being exhausted from the fuel cell. In the latter portion of the oxidant flow field, the oxidant stream can become saturated with water, in which case two phase flow occurs, that is, the oxidant stream contains water vapor and also has liquid water entrained in the stream.

[0010] Wet and dry regions of the flow field can detrimentally affect fuel cell performance and accelerate the degradation of performance over time. Fuel cell performance is defined as the voltage output from the cell for a given current density; the higher the voltage for a given current density, the better. Control of water transport in the "z" direction (perpendicular to the plane); that is, movement of water in the direction from the cathode electrocatalyst layer to the oxidant flow channels (the "free stream"), is important to optimizing fuel cell performance. The "free stream" is the fluid stream within the reactant distribution channels.

[0011] In addition to the control of water transport, control of oxidant transport along the z-axis, that is, movement of oxygen in the direction from the oxidant flow channels or free stream to the cathode electrocatalyst layer, is important to optimizing fuel cell performance. The concentration of oxygen at the electrocatalyst layer directly affects fuel cell performance because oxygen concentration affects the rate of the electrochemical reaction.

[0012] Further, at the anode in direct methanol fuel cells, control of methanol transport towards the electrocatalyst layer and transport of carbon dioxide, a product of the oxidation of methanol, away from the anode electrocatalyst layer are important to optimizing fuel cell performance.

[0013] It is therefore an object of the invention to improve fuel cell performance by controlling the transport of reaction product through the electrode substrate along the z-axis away from the electrocatalyst layer, and/or by controlling the transport of reactant through the electrode substrate along the z-axis toward the electrocatalyst layer.

[0014] This object is achieved by an electrochemical fuel cell according to claim 1.

[0015] The present invention makes use of an electrode substrate which, on a macroscopic scale, has an in-plane nonuniform structure. In other words, as the structure of the substrate is traversed parallel to its major planar surfaces at some depth, structural discontinuities (over and above those inherent in the microscopic structure of the substrate material) are encountered.

[0016] In a hydrogen/oxygen fuel cell, the fuel stream comprises hydrogen, the oxidant stream comprises oxygen, and the reaction product comprises water.

[0017] In a direct methanol fuel cell, the fuel stream comprises methanol, the oxidant stream comprises oxygen, the reaction product of the oxidation of the fuel stream comprises carbon dioxide, and the reaction product of the reduction of the oxidant stream comprises water.

[0018] Further embodiments of the present invention are defined in claims 2, 3 and 6 to 23.

Brief Description Of The Drawings

[0019] FIG. 1A is a side elevation view of a typical fuel cell stack showing the electrochemically active and humidification sections.

[0020] FIG. 1B is an exploded perspective view of a fuel cell stack with an electrochemically active section.

[0021] FIG. 2 is an exploded side view of a typical membrane electrode assembly interposed between two separator plates having reactant flow channels formed in the surfaces facing the electrodes.

[0022] FIG. 3 is a plan view of the cathode separator plate for the fuel cell of FIG. 2, illustrating the plurality of flow channels for directing an oxidant stream between an inlet and an outlet.

[0023] FIG. 4 is a cross-sectional view of a conventional (prior art) cathode substrate for the fuel cell of FIG. 2, schematically illustrating the oxidant stream flow in the direction of arrow A.

[0024] FIG. 5 is a cross-sectional view of a cathode substrate having a grooved surface facing the oxidant flow field for the fuel cell of FIG. 2, schematically illustrating the oxidant stream flow in the direction of arrow A.

[0025] FIG. 6 is a cross-sectional view of a cathode substrate having openings piercing both surfaces for the fuel cell of FIG. 2, schematically illustrating the oxidant stream flow in the direction of arrow A.

[0026] FIG. 7 is a cross-sectional view of the cathode substrate of FIG. 6 in which hydrophilic material is embedded in the pierced openings, schematically illustrating the oxidant stream flow in the direction of arrow A.

[0027] FIG. 8 is a cross-sectional view of a cathode substrate having angled openings piercing both surfaces for the fuel cell of FIG. 2.

[0028] FIG. 9 is a cross-sectional view of a cathode substrate having a fluid impermeable or semi-permeable coating disposed on the surface facing the oxidant flow field, schematically illustrating the oxidant stream flow in the direction of arrow A.

[0029] FIG. 10 is a cross-sectional view of a cathode substrate having a fluid impermeable or semi-permeable coating disposed on the surface facing the electrocatalyst, schematically illustrating the oxidant stream flow in the direction of arrow A.

[0030] FIG. 11 is a plan view of the cathode separator plate for the fuel cell of FIG. 2, showing superimposed thereon the pattern of channels formed in the portion of the cathode substrate adjacent the oxidant stream outlet.

[0031] FIG. 12 is a plan view of a cathode substrate comprising a first material having an opening extending between the major surfaces thereof in which a patch of a second material having different reaction product and/or reactant transport properties from the first material is embedded in the opening.

5 [0032] FIG. 13 is a plan view of a cathode substrate in which the substrate portion adjacent the oxidant stream inlet consists of a first material (indicated by a first set broken lines) and the substrate portion adjacent the oxidant stream outlet consists of a second material (indicated by a second set of broken lines perpendicular to the first set) having different reaction product and/or reactant transport properties from the first material.

10 [0033] FIG. 14A is a plan view of a cathode substrate having a grooved surface facing the oxidant flow field for the fuel cell of FIG. 2 with the separator plate of FIG. 3, where the grooves are irregularly spaced such that there is a greater occurrence of grooves in the portion of the substrate adjacent the oxidant stream outlet.

15 [0034] FIG. 14B is a plan view of a cathode substrate having openings piercing both surfaces for the fuel cell of FIG. 2 with the separator plate of FIG. 3, where the openings are irregularly spaced such that there is a greater occurrence of openings in the portion of the substrate adjacent the oxidant stream outlet.

[0035] FIG. 15 is a plot of voltage versus current density (amperes per square meter) for the conventional cathode substrate shown in FIG. 4 (plot J), for the one-half carbon fiber paper/one-half carbon cloth cathode substrate shown in FIG. 13 (plot K), for the grooved cathode substrate shown in FIG. 5 (plot L), and for the pierced cathode substrate shown in FIG. 6 (plot M).

20 [0036] FIG. 16 is a bar graph showing the fuel cell voltages achieved using oxygen-containing air and a mixture of 21% oxygen/79% helium for each of the conventional cathode substrate shown in FIG. 4 (group Q), the grooved cathode substrate shown in FIG. 5 (group R), the pierced cathode substrate shown in FIG. 6 (group S), and the one-half carbon fiber paper/one-half carbon cloth cathode substrate shown in FIG. 13 (group T).

Detailed Description Of The Preferred Embodiments

25 [0037] Referring first to FIG. 1A, a fuel cell stack assembly 10 includes an electrochemically active section 26 and a humidification section 28. Stack assembly 10 is a modular plate and frame design, and includes a compression end plate 16 and a fluid end plate 18. An optional pneumatic piston 17, positioned within compression end plate 16, applies uniform pressure to the assembly to promote sealing. Bus plates 22 and 24 located on opposite ends of active section 26 provide the negative and positive contacts, respectively, to draw current generated by the assembly to a load (not shown). Tie rods 20 extend between end plates 16 and 18 to retain and secure stack assembly 10 in its assembled state with fastening nuts 21.

30 [0038] Active section 26 includes, in addition to bus plates 22 and 24, a plurality of fuel cell repeating units 12. Each repeating unit 12 consists of at least one membrane electrode assembly, separator plates and an optional cooling jacket. The repeating units 12 are electrically coupled in series by virtue of the contact between the electrically conductive sheets, separator plates, and optional cooling jackets.

35 [0039] Humidification section 28 includes a plurality of humidification assemblies 14, each assembly 14 consisting of fuel or oxidant reactant flow field plate, a water flow field plate, and a water vapor transport membrane interposed between the reactant flow field plate and the water flow field plate. Humidification section 28 imparts water vapor to the fuel and oxidant streams which are then fed to active section 26, thereby preventing the membranes within the active section from drying out.

40 [0040] Turning now to FIG. 1B, a fuel cell stack 11 has an active section but does not have a humidification section as part of the stack. Like fuel cell stack 10 in FIG. 1A, stack 11 in FIG. 1B includes a compression end plate 16, a fluid end plate 18, and a plurality of repeating units. Tie rods 20 extend between end plates 16 and 18 to retain and secure stack assembly 11 in its assembled state with fastening nuts 21.

45 [0041] As also shown in exploded form in FIG. 1B, stack 11 includes an anode separator plate 34, a cathode separator plate 36, and a membrane electrode assembly 32 interposed between plates 34 and 36. As shown in FIG. 1B, plate 34 has a plurality of fluid flow channels 34a formed in its major surface facing MEA 32.

50 [0042] FIG. 2 illustrates a typical fuel cell 30. Fuel cell 30 includes membrane electrode assembly 32 interposed between anode flow field or separator plate 34 and cathode flow field or separator plate 36. Membrane electrode assembly 32 consists of an ion exchange membrane 40 interposed between two electrodes, namely, anode 41 and cathode 42. In conventional fuel cells, anode 41 and cathode 42 comprise a substrate of porous electrically conductive sheet material 43 and 44, respectively, preferably carbon fiber paper or carbon cloth, having planar major surfaces. Each substrate has a thin layer of electrocatalyst 45 and 46, respectively, preferably finely comminuted platinum, disposed on one of the major surfaces at the interface with membrane 40 to render each electrode electrochemically active.

55 [0043] As further shown in FIG. 2, anode separator plate 34 has at least one fuel flow channel 34a engraved, milled or molded in its surface facing anode 41. Similarly, cathode separator plate 36 has at least one oxidant flow channel 36a engraved, milled or molded in its surface facing cathode 42. When assembled against the cooperating surfaces of electrodes 41 and 42, channels 34a and 36a form the reactant flow field passages for the fuel and oxidant, respec-

tively.

[0044] FIG. 3 shows that channels 36a of cathode separator plate 36 are preferably engraved, milled or molded as a plurality of separately formed oxidant flow channels 36a which extend across the major surface of the cathode separator plate in a serpentine pattern. Channels 36a include inlet channel portions 56 and an outlet channel portions 58, which are directly connected to oxidant inlet manifold opening 55 and oxidant outlet manifold opening 57, respectively. In operation, a pressurized oxidant stream is directed into inlet manifold opening 55, from which the stream is split among inlet channels 56. The oxidant stream is then directed through channels 36a to outlet channel portions 58, from which the stream is exhausted into oxidant outlet manifold opening 57. The multiple serpentine channel flow field plate configuration illustrated in FIG. 3 is more completely described in U.S. Patent No. 5,108,849.

[0045] FIG. 4 shows conventional (prior art) cathode substrate 42 of fuel cell 30 in FIG. 2. Cathode substrate 42 comprises a substantially continuous sheet of electrically conductive material, typically carbon fiber paper, and has opposite major planar surfaces 42a, 42b. The oxidant stream flows in the direction of arrow A within at least one channel formed in the cathode flow field/separator plate (not shown) adjacent the surface 42a of cathode 42. Surface 42b has a thin layer of electrocatalyst, preferably finely comminuted platinum, disposed thereon at the interface with adjacent membrane (see FIG. 2). In the conventional cathode substrate illustrated in FIG. 4, the structure of the substrate is substantially uniform, on a macroscopic scale, as it is traversed in-plane at any depth.

[0046] FIG. 5 shows a cathode substrate 66 having a grooved surface 66a facing the oxidant flow field for fuel cell 30 of FIG. 2. The grooved surface has at least one channel 68 formed therein. Channels 68 can be oriented in any direction with respect to the flow field channels in the adjacent separator plate. Preferably, however, channels 68 are angularly oriented to improve oxidant transport to area beneath the lands (the raised areas between the channels) of the adjacent separator plate.

[0047] In FIG. 5, the oxidant stream flows in the direction of arrow A. Surface 66b has a thin layer of electrocatalyst, preferably finely comminuted platinum, disposed thereon at the interface with adjacent membrane (see FIG. 2).

[0048] FIG. 6 shows a cathode substrate 76 having openings 78 which extend between and pierce both surfaces 76a, 76b of cathode substrate 76. The oxidant stream flows in the direction of arrow A. Surface 76b has a thin layer of electrocatalyst, preferably finely comminuted platinum, disposed thereon at the interface with adjacent membrane (see FIG. 2).

[0049] The grooved and pierced embodiments of FIGS. 5 and 6 are designed to control product water transport away from and/or oxygen transport toward the electrocatalyst layer. The grooved or pierced embodiments are intended to be employed in regions of the electrode substrate in which excess product water accumulates. In the grooved embodiment of FIG. 5, the grooving could be accomplished with varying cross-sectional configurations, such as, for example, a ramp, rectangular, trapezoidal, triangular, or semicircular cross-sectional shape. The depth and width of the grooves can be adjusted to provide control of oxidant transport toward the electrocatalyst layer and/or control of product water transport from the electrocatalyst layer.

[0050] FIG. 7 shows a cathode substrate 86 in which hydrophilic fibers 89 are embedded in the openings 88 which extend between and pierce both surfaces 86a, 86b of cathode 86. The oxidant stream flows in the direction of arrow A. Surface 86b has a thin layer of electrocatalyst, preferably finely comminuted platinum, disposed thereon at the interface with adjacent membrane (see FIG. 2).

[0051] The employment of hydrophilic material in FIG. 7 enhances product water removal from the electrocatalyst layer adjacent the cathode substrate 86. In this regard, hydrophilic fibers could also be woven into the sheet material in the desired quantity and in the desired location(s) to control the rate of water removal.

[0052] FIG. 8 shows a cathode substrate 96 having angled openings 98 which extend between and pierce both surfaces 96a, 96b of cathode substrate 96. The oxidant stream flows within at least one channel 106 formed in the cathode flow field/separator plate 102 adjacent surface 96a of cathode substrate 96. Surface 96b has a thin layer 110 of electrocatalyst, preferably finely comminuted platinum, disposed thereon at the interface with adjacent membrane (not shown). As shown in FIG. 8, the angled pierced openings 98 of cathode substrate 96 are preferably oriented such that the openings extend from surface 96a at a point adjacent oxidant flow channel 106 to surface 96b at a point below landing areas 104 of cathode flow field/separator plate 102.

[0053] The angled pierced openings in the embodiment of FIG. 8 enhances oxygen transport toward the electrocatalyst layer beneath the landing areas 104 of plate 102. In conventional, unpierced embodiments, electrochemical activity is generally reduced beneath the landing areas. It is believed that angled pierced openings or angled grooves improve the accessibility of the electrode portion beneath the landing areas to oxygen.

[0054] In addition to the embodiments of FIGS. 5-8 that are specifically directed to enhance product water removal, the electrode substrate structure can be modified to control the retention of product water. Such a modified electrode substrate structure to enhance product water retention would be employed in the portions of the electrode that run too dry or to permit operation of the fuel cell with drier reactant inlet conditions (less humidification). Water retention is generally accomplished by employing a coat of water impermeable or semi-permeable material, such as NAFION perfluorosulfonic ion exchange membrane or a layer of carbon particles on the surface of the electrode substrate to

occlude the pores. The water impermeable or semi-permeable material can be employed either on the surface of the electrode substrate facing the oxidant stream or on the surface of the electrode substrate on which the electrocatalyst is subsequently applied.

[0055] FIG. 9 shows a cathode substrate 116 having a fluid impermeable or semi-permeable coating layer 118 disposed on the surface 116a of cathode substrate 116 facing the oxidant flow field. The oxidant stream flows in the direction of arrow A. Surface 116b has a thin layer of electrocatalyst, preferably finely comminuted platinum, disposed thereon at the interface with adjacent membrane (see FIG. 2).

[0056] FIG. 10 shows a cathode substrate 126 having a fluid impermeable or semi-permeable coating layer 128 disposed on the surface 126b of cathode substrate 126 facing the electrocatalyst. The oxidant stream flows in the direction of arrow A adjacent surface 126a. Surface 126b has a thin layer of electrocatalyst (not shown), preferably finely comminuted platinum, subsequently applied thereon at the interface with adjacent membrane (see FIG. 2).

[0057] FIG. 11 shows a cathode flow field/separator plate 150 for fuel cell 30 of FIG. 2. Plate 150 has serpentine oxidant flow channels 152 formed in a major surface thereof for directing an oxidant stream between an oxidant inlet manifold opening 154 and an oxidant outlet manifold opening 156. FIG. 11 shows a plurality of channels 158 formed in the portion of the cathode substrate surface adjacent the oxidant outlet 156.

[0058] Product water transport can also be controlled by the use of different types of electrode substrate materials in different regions of the electrochemically active area of the fuel cell to form a hybrid substrate structure. For example, carbon cloth generally exhibits superior oxygen transport properties to carbon fiber paper, but carbon cloth also has disadvantages with respect to carbon fiber paper, for example, poorer processibility under some conditions and tendency to dry the membrane under some operating conditions. Patches of carbon cloth can be substituted in those regions of a carbon fiber paper electrode substrate in which increased product water removal is desired, while retaining the advantages of the carbon fiber paper in the remaining areas. Patch materials other than carbon cloth could also be employed, such as, for example, a lower porosity carbon fiber paper, to decrease the rate of product water transport away from the electrocatalyst layer, or a higher porosity carbon fiber paper to increase the rate of product water transport away from the electrocatalyst layer.

[0059] FIG. 12 shows a cathode substrate 160 comprising a first sheet material 162, preferably carbon fiber paper. Cathode substrate 160 has an opening extending between the major surfaces thereof in which a patch of a second material 164, preferably carbon cloth having different water transport properties from the first material, is embedded.

[0060] FIG. 13 shows a cathode substrate 170 in which the portion adjacent the oxidant stream inlet 176 consists of a first material 172 (indicated by a first set of broken lines), preferably carbon fiber paper, and the cathode portion adjacent the oxidant stream outlet 178 consists of a second material 174 (indicated by a second set of broken lines perpendicular to the first set), preferably carbon cloth having different water transport properties from the first material.

[0061] In-plane structural nonuniformities in the substrate may be distributed unevenly (that is, irregularly spaced) to impart different mass transport properties in different regions of the electrode substrate. For example, the grooves and channels of the above embodiments may be employed only in particular regions of the electrode substrate, or may be introduced in a graded fashion across the entire substrate.

[0062] FIGS. 14A and 14B show cathode substrates in which the in-plane structural nonuniformities (grooves and openings, respectively) are irregularly spaced across the substrate. FIG. 14A shows a cathode substrate 180 for a fuel cell 30 of FIG. 2 with a cathode separator plate 36 of FIG. 3. Cathode substrate 180 has an inlet portion 181 proximate oxidant inlet manifold opening 182 and an outlet portion 183 proximate oxidant outlet manifold opening 184. Cathode substrate 180 further has a grooved surface with channels 188 formed therein, facing the oxidant flow field of the adjacent separator plate 36. The distribution of channels 188 formed in the surface of cathode substrate 180 is graded such that the ratio of the area circumscribed by channels 188 to the surface area of cathode substrate 180 in the outlet portion 183 is greater than the ratio of the area circumscribed by channels 188 to the surface area of cathode substrate 180 in the inlet portion 181.

[0063] FIG. 14B shows a cathode substrate 190 for the fuel cell 30 of FIG. 1 with a cathode separator plate 36 of FIG. 3. Cathode substrate 190 has an inlet portion 191 proximate oxidant inlet manifold opening 192 and an outlet portion 193 proximate oxidant outlet manifold opening 194. Cathode substrate 190 further has openings 198 formed therein which pierce both surfaces. The distribution of openings 198 formed in the cathode substrate 190 is graded such that the ratio of the area circumscribed by the openings 198 to the surface area of the substrate in the outlet portion 193 is greater than the ratio of the area circumscribed by the openings 198 to the surface area of the substrate 190 in the inlet portion 191. The outlet portion of the substrate is generally the region in which excess product water tends to accumulate.

[0064] The grooved, pierced, and hybrid electrode substrate embodiments have been evaluated to determine the performance of each embodiment. The cathode substrates in two of the tests had structural nonuniformity introduced at regular intervals across the entire electrochemically active area (that is, no uneven distribution or irregular spacing of structural in-plane nonuniformity to optimize fuel cell performance). In the case of grooved substrates, the grooves were formed approximately 0.013 centimeters deep and approximately 0.050 centimeters wide with a spacing between

grooves of approximately 0.254 centimeters. In the case of pierced substrates, the pierced openings were formed with a diameter of approximately 0.050 centimeters with a spacing between openings of approximately 0.254 centimeters. In the case of hybrid substrates, carbon fiber paper was employed for the inlet portion and carbon cloth as the outlet portion, as illustrated in FIG. 13.

5 [0065] FIG. 15 is a plot of voltage versus current density (amperes per square meter) for the conventional cathode substrate shown in FIG. 4 (plot J), for the one-half carbon fiber paper/one-half carbon cloth substrate shown in FIG. 13 (plot K), for the grooved substrate shown in FIG. 5 (plot L), and for the pierced substrate shown in FIG. 6 (plot M).

10 [0066] FIG. 15 shows that, at high current densities (that is, greater than 10760 amps per square meter), the grooved substrate, pierced substrate, and hybrid substrate, demonstrate fuel cell performance superior to that achieved with conventional cathode substrate structures having a uniform in-plane structure. In this regard, the grooved substrate, pierced substrate, and hybrid substrates exhibit output cell voltages which are greater at a given current density than the cell voltage using a conventional cathode substrates. Mass transport limitations tend to be revealed at high current densities because the electrochemical reaction is more sensitive to the concentration of the reactant at the electrocatalyst layer. Greater amounts of reaction product are generated at high current densities. It is advantageous to transport reaction product (water in the case of a hydrogen/oxygen fuel cell) accumulated at the electrocatalyst layer away from the electrocatalyst layer. The increase in performance at high current densities is an indication of the improved mass transport of reactant and reaction product achieved with cathode substrates having an in-plane nonuniform structure.

15 [0067] FIG. 16 is a bar graph showing the fuel cell voltages achieved using each of the conventional substrate shown in FIG. 4 (group Q), the grooved substrate shown in FIG. 5 (group R), the pierced substrate shown in FIG. 6 (group S), and the one-half carbon fiber paper/one-half carbon cloth substrate shown in FIG. 13 (group T). FIG. 16 reports the output cell voltage, at a current density of 10760 amps per square meter, for a single cell containing a conventional cathode substrate Q with an essentially uniform in-plane structure, and three cathodes R, S and T, each having an in-plane nonuniform structure. Each of cathodes substrates Q, R, S and T were operated on two different oxidant stream compositions: air (which contains 21% oxygen with the balance substantially nitrogen) and "helox" (79% helium/21% oxygen). Thus, in the helox and air streams, the concentration of oxygen, the reactive constituent, is the same. However, oxygen diffuses more readily (faster) through helium than through air, which is mainly composed of nitrogen. Thus, the diffusion coefficient of oxygen is greater in helium than in nitrogen. Consequently, for a given electrode, the difference between the output cell voltage obtained using air and the output cell voltage obtained using helox is indicative of the extent to which oxygen diffusion problems exist. These differences are reported in Table 1 for each of the four subject

20 30 cathode substrates.

Table 1

	Conventional Substrate	Pierced Substrate	Grooved Substrate	Hybrid Substrate
ΔVoltage	170 mV	100 mV	59 mV	65 mV

35 where ΔVoltage, expressed in millivolts, is the output cell voltage obtained using helox minus the output cell voltage obtained using air, at a current density of 10760 amps per square meter.

40 [0068] The data in FIG. 16 and Table 1 indicate that the grooved substrate, pierced substrate, and hybrid substrate exhibit less gain in performance (voltage) on switching from air to helox, than the gain in performance exhibited by a the conventional cathode substrate. This in turn indicates that the grooved, pierced and hybrid substrates (that is, those having an in-plane nonuniform structure) have superior oxygen transport characteristics relative to conventional cathode substrates (that is, those having an in-plane structure that is essentially uniform, on a macroscopic scale).

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Claims

1. An electrochemical fuel cell comprising:

50 (a) an anode substrate having a pair of oppositely facing major planar surfaces, said anode substrate further having a catalyst disposed on one of the major planar surfaces thereof for promoting the oxidation of a fuel stream;

(b) a cathode substrate having a pair of oppositely facing major planar surfaces, said cathode substrate further having a catalyst disposed on one of the major planar surfaces thereof for promoting the reduction of an oxidant stream to form a reaction product;

55 (c) a membrane electrolyte interposed between each of the surfaces of the anode substrate and the cathode substrate having catalyst disposed thereon, said catalyst defining an electrochemically active region;

(d) an anode separator plate disposed adjacent the major planar surface of said anode substrate facing away

from said membrane electrolyte, said anode separator plate having a fuel stream inlet, a fuel stream outlet, and at least one channel for directing said fuel stream between said fuel stream inlet and said fuel stream outlet; (e) a cathode separator plate disposed adjacent the major planar surface of said cathode substrate facing away from said membrane electrolyte, said cathode separator plate having an oxidant stream inlet, an oxidant stream outlet, and at least one channel for directing said oxidant stream between said oxidant stream inlet and said oxidant stream outlet;

wherein,

at least one of said anode substrate and said cathode substrate having an in-plane nonuniform structure in said electrochemically active region such that different regions of said at least one substrate have different fluid mass transport properties in a direction generally perpendicular to said major planar surfaces.

2. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 1 wherein said in-plane nonuniform structure is regularly spaced across at least one of said substrates.

3. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 1 wherein said in-plane nonuniform structure is irregularly spaced across at least one of said substrates.

4. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 1 wherein said fuel stream comprises hydrogen, said oxidant stream comprises oxygen, and said reaction product comprises water.

5. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 1 wherein said fuel stream comprises methanol, said oxidant stream comprises oxygen, the reaction product of the oxidation of said fuel stream comprises carbon dioxide, and the reaction product of the reaction of said oxidant stream comprises water.

6. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 1 wherein said in-plane nonuniform structure comprises at least one channel formed on the major surface of said cathode substrate facing said cathode separator plate.

7. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 6 wherein said at least one channel comprises a plurality of channels.

8. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 6 wherein said cathode substrate major surface consists of an inlet portion adjacent said oxidant stream inlet and an outlet portion adjacent said oxidant stream outlet, and wherein the ratio of the area circumscribed by said at least one channel to the surface area of said substrate in said outlet portion is greater than the ratio of the area circumscribed by said at least one channel to the surface area of said substrate in said inlet portion.

9. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 1 wherein said in-plane nonuniform structure comprises at least one opening formed in said cathode substrate, said at least one opening extending between and piercing both major surfaces of said cathode substrate.

10. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 9 wherein said at least one opening comprises a plurality of openings.

11. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 10 wherein said cathode major surface consists of an inlet portion adjacent said oxidant stream inlet and an outlet portion adjacent said oxidant stream outlet, and wherein the ratio of the area circumscribed by said openings to the surface area of said substrate in said outlet portion is greater than the ratio of the area circumscribed by said openings to the surface area of said substrate in said inlet portion.

12. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 9 wherein each of said at least one opening extends angularly between and pierces both of said cathode substrate major surfaces from a point adjacent said at least one channel formed in the major surface of said cathode separator plate.

13. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 9 wherein said at least one opening has a quantity of hydrophilic material disposed therein.

14. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 9 wherein said at least one opening has a quantity of hydrophobic material disposed therein.

15. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 1 wherein said cathode substrate comprises a coating layer disposed on a

portion of at least one of said major planar surfaces, said coating layer comprising material that is semipermeable to water.

16. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 15 wherein said cathode substrate major surface consists of an inlet portion adjacent said oxidant stream inlet and an outlet portion adjacent said oxidant stream outlet, and wherein said coating layer is disposed on said inlet portion.

17. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 16 wherein said cathode substrate major surface faces said cathode separator plate.

18. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 16 wherein said cathode substrate major surface faces said membrane electrolyte.

19. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 1 wherein said cathode substrate comprises at least two porous electrically conductive sheet materials arranged in substantially the same plane.

20. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 1 wherein said cathode substrate comprises a first porous electrically conductive sheet material and wherein said in-plane nonuniform structure comprises at least one opening formed in said cathode substrate, said at least one opening extending between and piercing both major surfaces of said first sheet material, said at least one opening having a quantity of a second porous electrically conductive sheet material disposed therein.

21. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 20 wherein said cathode substrate consists of an inlet portion adjacent said oxidant stream inlet and an outlet portion adjacent said oxidant stream outlet, and wherein said at least one opening is formed in said outlet portion.

22. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 20 wherein said first porous electrically conductive sheet material is carbon fiber paper and said second porous electrically conductive sheet material is carbon cloth.

23. The electrochemical fuel cell of claim 20 wherein said first porous electrically conductive sheet material is carbon fiber paper having a first porosity and said second porous electrically conductive sheet material is carbon fiber paper having a second porosity.

35 Patentansprüche

1. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle umfassend:

a) ein Anodensubstrat mit einem Paar entgegengesetzt gerichteter, ebener Hauptflächen, wobei das genannte Anodensubstrat weiters auf einer seiner ebenen Hauptflächen einen Katalysator zum Fördern der Oxidation eines Brennstoffstromes angeordnet hat,

b) ein Kathodensubstrat mit einem Paar entgegengesetzt gerichteter, ebener Hauptflächen, wobei das genannte Kathodensubstrat weiters auf einer seiner ebenen Hauptflächen einen Katalysator zum Fördern der Reduzierung eines Oxidationsmittelstromes zur Bildung eines Reaktionsprodukts angeordnet hat,

c) einen zwischen jeweils den Flächen des Anodensubstrats und des Kathodensubstrats, auf welchen Katalysator angeordnet ist, eingesetzten Membran-Elektrolyten, wobei der genannte Katalysator eine elektrochemisch aktive Zone abgrenzt,

d) eine Anoden-Separatorplatte, die neben der von dem genannten Membran-Elektrolyten abgewendeten ebenen Hauptfläche des genannten Anodensubstrats angeordnet ist, wobei die genannte Anoden-Separatorplatte einen Brennstoffstrom-Einlaß, einen Brennstoffstrom-Auslaß und mindestens einen Kanal zum Leiten des genannten Brennstoffstromes zwischen dem genannten Brennstoffstrom-Einlaß und dem genannten Brennstoffstrom-Auslaß besitzt,

e) eine Kathoden-Separatorplatte, die neben der von dem genannten Membran-Elektrolyten abgewendeten ebenen Hauptfläche des genannten Kathodensubstrats angeordnet ist, wobei die genannte Kathoden-Separatorplatte einen Oxidationsmittelstrom-Einlaß, einen Oxidationsmittelstrom-Auslaß und mindestens einen Kanal zum Leiten des genannten Oxidationsmittelstromes zwischen dem genannten Oxidationsmittelstrom-Einlaß und dem genannten Oxidationsmittelstrom-Auslaß besitzt,

dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß mindestens das genannte Anodensubstrat oder das genannte Kathodensubstrat in der genannten elektrochemisch aktiven Zone eine in der gleichen Ebene unregelmäßige Struktur hat, derart, daß unterschiedliche Bereiche des genannten mindestens einen Substrats unterschiedliche Fluid-Massentransport-eigenschaften in einer Richtung im wesentlichen senkrecht zu den genannten ebenen Hauptflächen besitzen.

5 2. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 1, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die genannte in der gleichen Ebene unregelmäßige Struktur über mindestens eines der genannten Substrate regelmäßig verteilt ist.

10 3. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 1, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die genannte in der gleichen Ebene unregelmäßige Struktur über mindestens eines der genannten Substrate unregelmäßig verteilt ist.

15 4. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 1, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß der genannte Brennstoffstrom Wasserstoff enthält, der genannte Oxidationsmittelstrom Sauerstoff enthält und das genannte Reaktionsprodukt Wasser enthält.

20 5. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 1, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß der genannte Brennstoffstrom Methanol enthält, der genannte Oxidationsmittelstrom Sauerstoff enthält, das Reaktionsprodukt der Oxidation des genannten Brennstoffstromes Kohlendioxid enthält und das Reaktionsprodukt der Reaktion des genannten Oxidationsmittelstromes Wasser enthält.

25 6. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 1, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die genannte in der gleichen Ebene unregelmäßige Struktur mindestens einen auf der der genannten Kathoden-Separatorplatte gegenüberliegenden Hauptfläche des genannten Kathodensubstrats ausgebildeten Kanal umfaßt.

30 7. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 6, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß der genannte mindestens eine Kanal eine Mehrzahl von Kanälen umfaßt.

35 8. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 6, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die genannte Kathodensubstrat-Hauptfläche aus einem Einlaßabschnitt neben dem genannten Oxidationsmittelstrom-Einlaß und einem Auslaßabschnitt neben dem genannten Oxidationsmittelstrom-Auslaß besteht, und daß das Verhältnis der von dem genannten mindestens einen Kanal umschriebenen Fläche zum Flächeninhalt des genannten Substrats im genannten Auslaßabschnitt größer ist als das Verhältnis der von dem genannten mindestens einen Kanal umschriebenen Fläche zum Flächeninhalt des genannten Substrats im genannten Einlaßabschnitt.

40 9. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 1, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die genannte in der gleichen Ebene unregelmäßige Struktur mindestens eine in dem genannten Kathodensubstrat ausgebildete Öffnung umfaßt, wobei die genannte mindestens eine Öffnung sich zwischen den beiden Hauptflächen des genannten Kathodensubstrats erstreckt und diese durchsetzt.

45 10. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 9, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die genannte mindestens eine Öffnung eine Mehrzahl von Öffnungen umfaßt.

11. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 10, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die genannte Kathodensubstrat-Hauptfläche aus einem Einlaßabschnitt neben dem genannten Oxidationsmittelstrom-Einlaß und einem Auslaßabschnitt neben dem genannten Oxidationsmittelstrom-Auslaß besteht, und daß das Verhältnis der von den genannten Öffnungen umschriebenen Fläche zum Flächeninhalt des genannten Substrats im genannten Auslaßabschnitt größer ist als das Verhältnis der von den genannten Öffnungen umschriebenen Fläche zum Flächeninhalt des genannten Substrats im genannten Einlaßabschnitt.

50 12. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 9, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß jede der genannten mindestens einen Öffnung sich von einem Punkt neben dem genannten mindestens einen in der Hauptfläche der genannten Kathoden-Separatorplatte ausgebildeten Kanal aus schräg zwischen den beiden genannten Kathodensubstrat-Hauptflächen erstreckt und diese durchsetzt.

55 13. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 9, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß in der genannten mindestens einen Öffnung eine Menge hydrophilen Materials angeordnet ist.

14. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 9, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß in der genannten mindestens

einen Öffnung eine Menge hydrophoben Materials angeordnet ist.

15. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 1, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das genannte Kathodensubstrat eine auf einem Teil mindestens einer der genannten ebenen Hauptflächen angeordnete Überzugsschicht enthält, wobei die genannte Überzugsschicht Material enthält, das gegenüber Wasser teildurchlässig ist.

16. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 15, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die genannte Kathodensubstrat-Hauptfläche aus einem Einlaßabschnitt neben dem genannten Oxidationsmittelstrom-Einlaß und einem Auslaßabschnitt neben dem genannten Oxidationsmittelstrom-Auslaß besteht, und daß die genannte Überzugsschicht auf dem genannten Einlaßabschnitt angeordnet ist.

17. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 16, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die genannte Kathodensubstrat-Hauptfläche gegen die genannte Kathoden-Separatorplatte gerichtet ist.

18. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 16, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß die genannte Kathodensubstrat-Hauptfläche gegen den genannten Membranelektrolyten gerichtet ist.

19. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 1, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das genannte Kathodensubstrat mindestens zwei poröse elektrisch leitende Blattmaterialien umfaßt, die im wesentlichen in der gleichen Ebene angeordnet sind.

20. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 1, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das genannte Kathodensubstrat ein erstes poröses, elektrisch leitendes Blattmaterial umfaßt, und daß die genannte in der gleichen Ebene unregelmäßige Struktur mindestens eine in dem genannten Kathodensubstrat ausgebildete Öffnung umfaßt, wobei die genannte mindestens eine Öffnung sich zwischen den beiden Hauptflächen des genannten ersten Blattmaterials erstreckt und diese durchsetzt, und wobei in der genannten mindestens einen Öffnung eine Menge eines zweiten porösen, elektrisch leitenden Blattmaterials angeordnet ist.

21. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 20, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das genannte Kathodensubstrat aus einem Einlaßabschnitt neben dem genannten Oxidationsmittelstrom-Einlaß und einem Auslaßabschnitt neben dem genannten Oxidationsmittelstrom-Auslaß besteht, und daß die genannte mindestens eine Öffnung in dem genannten Auslaßabschnitt ausgebildet ist.

22. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 20, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das genannte erste poröse, elektrisch leitende Blattmaterial Kohlefaserpapier und das genannte zweite poröse, elektrisch leitende Blattmaterial Kohlenstoff-“Gewebe” ist.

23. Elektrochemische Brennstoffzelle nach Anspruch 20, dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß das genannte erste poröse, elektrisch leitende Blattmaterial Kohlefaserpapier mit einer ersten Porosität und das genannte zweite, elektrisch leitende Blattmaterial Kohlefaserpapier mit einer zweiten Porosität ist.

Revendications

45. 1. Pile à combustible électrochimique comprenant:

(a) un substrat d'anode ayant une paire de surfaces planes principales se faisant face de façon opposée, ledit substrat d'anode ayant de plus un catalyseur disposé sur une de ses surfaces planes principales pour activer l'oxydation d'un courant combustible;

50. (b) un substrat de cathode ayant une paire de surfaces planes principales se faisant face de façon opposée, ledit substrat de cathode ayant de plus un catalyseur disposé sur une de ses surfaces planes principales pour activer la réduction d'un courant oxydant afin de former un produit réactionnel;

(c) un électrolyte de membrane intercalé entre chacune des surfaces du substrat d'anode et du substrat de cathode ayant un catalyseur disposé dessus, ledit catalyseur définissant une région électrochimiquement active;

55. (d) une plaque séparatrice d'anode disposée de manière adjacente à la surface plane principale dudit substrat d'anode faisant face loin dudit électrolyte de membrane, ladite plaque séparatrice d'anode ayant une entrée de courant de combustible, une sortie de courant de combustible, et au moins un canal pour diriger ledit

courant de combustible entre ladite entrée de courant de combustible et ladite sortie de courant de combustible;

5 (e) une plaque séparatrice de cathode disposée de manière adjacente à la surface plane principale dudit substrat de cathode faisant face loin dudit électrolyte de membrane, ladite plaque séparatrice de cathode ayant une entrée de courant d'oxydant, une sortie de courant d'oxydant et au moins un canal pour diriger ledit courant d'oxydant entre ladite entrée de courant d'oxydant et ladite sortie de courant d'oxydant;

10 dans laquelle au moins un dudit substrat d'anode et dudit substrat de cathode ayant une structure non uniforme en plan dans ladite région électrochimiquement active telle que différentes régions dudit au moins un substrat, ont des propriétés de transport de masse fluide différentes dans une direction généralement perpendiculaire auxdites surfaces planes principales.

2. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 1, dans laquelle ladite structure non uniforme en plan est régulièrement espacée à travers au moins un desdits substrats.
- 15 3. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 1, dans laquelle ladite structure non uniforme en plan est irrégulièrement espacée à travers au moins un desdits substrats.
- 20 4. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 1, dans laquelle ledit courant de combustible comprend l'hydrogène, ledit courant d'oxydant comprend l'oxygène et ledit produit réactionnel comprend l'eau.
- 25 5. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 1, dans laquelle ledit courant de combustible comprend le méthanol, ledit courant d'oxydant comprend l'oxygène, le produit réactionnel de l'oxydation dudit courant de combustible comprend le dioxyde de carbone et le produit réactionnel de la réaction dudit courant d'oxydant comprend l'eau.
- 30 6. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 1, dans laquelle ladite structure non uniforme en plan comprend au moins un canal formé sur la surface principale dudit substrat de cathode faisant face à ladite plaque de séparateur de cathode.
- 35 7. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 6, dans laquelle ledit au moins un canal comprend une pluralité de canaux.
8. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 6, dans laquelle ladite surface principale du substrat de cathode se compose d'une portion d'entrée adjacente à ladite entrée de courant d'oxydant et une portion de sortie adjacente à ladite sortie de courant d'oxydant, et dans laquelle le rapport de la surface circonscrite par ledit au moins un canal à la surface dudit substrat dans ladite portion de sortie est supérieur au rapport de la surface circonscrite par ledit au moins un canal à la surface dudit substrat dans ladite portion d'entrée.
- 40 9. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 1, dans laquelle ladite structure non uniforme en plan comprend au moins une ouverture formée dans ledit substrat de cathode, ladite au moins une ouverture s'étendant entre et perçant les deux surfaces principales dudit substrat de cathode.
- 45 10. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 9, dans laquelle ladite au moins une ouverture comprend une pluralité d'ouvertures.
11. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 10, dans laquelle ladite surface principale de cathode se compose d'une portion d'entrée adjacente à ladite entrée de courant d'oxydant et une portion de sortie adjacente à ladite sortie de courant d'oxydant, et dans laquelle le rapport de la surface circonscrite par lesdites ouvertures à la surface dudit substrat dans ladite portion de sortie est supérieur au rapport de la surface circonscrite par lesdites ouvertures à la surface dudit substrat dans ladite portion d'entrée.
- 50 12. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 9, dans laquelle chacune desdites au moins une ouverture s'étend obliquement entre et perce les deux dites surfaces principales de substrat de cathode à partir d'un point adjacent audit au moins un canal formé dans la surface principale de ladite plaque séparatrice de cathode.
13. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 9, dans laquelle ladite au moins une ouverture possède une quantité de matière hydrophile disposée dedans.

14. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 9, dans laquelle ladite au moins une ouverture possède une quantité de matière hydrophobe disposée dedans.

5 15. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 1, dans laquelle ledit substrat de cathode comprend une couche de revêtement disposée sur une portion d'au moins une desdites surfaces planes principales, ladite couche de revêtement comprenant une matière qui est semi-perméable à l'eau.

10 16. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 15, dans laquelle ladite surface principale de substrat de cathode se compose d'une portion d'entrée adjacente à ladite entrée de courant d'oxydant et une portion de sortie adjacente à ladite sortie de courant d'oxydant, et dans laquelle ladite couche de revêtement est disposée sur ladite portion d'entrée.

15 17. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 16, dans laquelle ladite surface principale de substrat de cathode fait face à ladite plaque séparatrice de cathode.

18. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 16, dans laquelle ladite surface principale de substrat de cathode fait face audit électrolyte de membrane.

20 19. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 1, dans laquelle ledit substrat de cathode comprend au moins deux matières de feuille électriquement conductrices poreuses disposées sensiblement dans le même plan.

25 20. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 1, dans laquelle ledit substrat de cathode comprend une première matière de feuille électriquement conductrice poreuse et dans laquelle ladite structure non uniforme en plan comprend au moins une ouverture formée dans ledit substrat de cathode, ladite au moins une ouverture s'étendant entre et perçant les deux surfaces principales de ladite première matière de feuille, ladite au moins une ouverture ayant une quantité d'une deuxième matière de feuille électriquement conductrice poreuse disposée dedans.

30 21. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 20, dans laquelle ledit substrat de cathode se compose d'une portion d'entrée adjacente à ladite entrée de courant d'oxydant et une portion de sortie adjacente à ladite sortie de courant d'oxydant, et dans laquelle ladite au moins une ouverture est formée dans ladite portion de sortie.

35 22. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 20, dans laquelle ladite première matière de feuille électriquement conductrice poreuse est un papier de fibre de carbone et ladite deuxième matière de feuille électriquement conductrice poreuse est un tissu de carbone.

40 23. Pile à combustible électrochimique selon la revendication 20, dans laquelle ladite première matière de feuille électriquement conductrice poreuse est un papier de fibre de carbone ayant une première porosité et ladite deuxième matière de feuille électriquement conductrice poreuse est un papier de fibre de carbone ayant une deuxième porosité.

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